

# THANATOLOGY

## “What Happens at Death?”

“Man dieth . . . and where is he?” This question was uttered by Job, the Patriarch, many thousands of years ago. It is still a question on the lips and in the hearts of multitudes of people. People everywhere are wondering about the dead. What is the final destiny of man? Is there really life after death? If so, where will man go and what conditions will exist? Who has not desired to know all he can about life after death? The late Andrew Carnegie even went so far as to offer \$1,000,000 to the one who could prove to his satisfaction the reality of life beyond the grave.

Where can we find satisfactory answers to such great mysteries? Science cannot give us the answers. Science cannot tell us where our loved ones are and what their condition is. The wisest of the world’s philosophers can only give us guesses when we stand before the grave and ask the question, “What about the dead?”

Where can we go to find the answers? The answers are found in the Bible. God’s Word is the only source of reliable information concerning the great mystery of death. We must turn to divine revelation for the answers.

### **The Material and Spiritual Natures of Man**

The Scriptures clearly indicate man has two distinct natures, a material nature, which is the physical body, and a spiritual nature. The body and the spiritual nature within the body are recognized as two different and distinct natures. Bancroft states, “The Scriptures clearly and distinctly teach that man as constituted by creation has a material nature and an immaterial nature.”

Many Scriptures point out the distinctions between the physical nature of man and the spiritual nature.

Job 32:8 - “But there is a spirit in man and the inspiration of the almighty giveth him understanding.”

Zechariah 12:1 - “The Lord stretcheth forth the heavens and layeth the foundations of the earth, and formeth the spirit of man within him.”

Note carefully the distinction between the ‘spirit within man’ and the ‘man’. The immaterial nature is something within the material man, two distinct natures.

Job 14:22 - “But his flesh upon him shall have pain, and his soul within him shall mourn.”

Here the ‘flesh’ and the ‘soul’ are distinct. The flesh is ‘upon him’ and envelops the soul. The soul is ‘within him’ or in the body. These two natures, the outer and the inner, constitute the man.

I Corinthians 6:20 - “For ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.”

I Corinthians 2:11 - “For what knoweth the things of man, save the spirit of man which is in him?”

Again, the distinction between the material and immaterial natures is obvious. Man clearly has a spiritual nature as well as a physical nature.

We see this compound nature of man in his creation as recorded in Genesis 2:7, “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

First, God “Formed man of the dust of the ground.” This of course was his material nature, the body. Man’s body was framed from the material of the earth; therefore, it is earthly or physical.

Next, God “Breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,” something not of the earth, something from God Himself. This was man’s immaterial nature and was distinct from his body. The result of this union of material and immaterial was a ‘living soul’ or a living being called man.

It is obvious to all man has a physical nature. We can see it and feel it, but we must never forget we have an immaterial nature also.

Some years ago Dr. William Mayo, world famous surgeon and chief of staff at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, said, “The keen blade of my scalpel may never uncover the soul as a tangible part of the mystery called man, but I know it is there. I am as confident of its presence as I am of the most elemental truth to which my own medical science adheres.”

### **The Nature of Death**

Life began with the union of the material and immaterial natures of man to form a living being. (Gen. 2:7). We will now see death is the separation of these two natures from one another and that this is the common usage in the Scriptures.

The original sentence of death implies only the death of the body. “...Thou shalt return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; of dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” (Gen. 3:19). Here it is plain, that only so much of man was ‘dust’, and ‘taken out of the ground’. Therefore, only that which is of dust will return to dust.

The ‘breath of life’ or spirit, breathed into Adam by his Creator, was not ‘dust’ nor ‘taken out of the ground’. It therefore was not doomed to return to dust with the body at death. With this H. C. Thiessen agrees as he states, “Physical death is the separation of soul and body. It is represented in the Scriptures as a part of the penalty of sin.”

The Scriptures are in harmony that death is the separation of the spiritual nature of man from the physical nature. Note the following Bible verses on the subject.

Ecclesiastes 8:8 - “There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death.”

Ecclesiastes 12:7 - “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return to God who gave it.”

The allusion to Genesis 3:19 in these verses is unmistakable. We clearly see the dust returning to dust, while the spirit separates from the body and returns to God who gave it.

Death is the separation of the soul from the body. This is clearly seen in I Kings 17:20-22, where Elijah prayed that the son of the widow of Zarephath might be restored to life. “And he cried unto the Lord, and said, O Lord my God . . . I pray thee, let this child’s soul come into him again. And the Lord heard the voice of Elijah, and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived.” This portion clearly shows the soul had departed and that death is a state in which the soul is separated from the body.

The Apostle Paul sets forth this same truth in II Corinthians 5:6-9, “Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord . . . we are . . . willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.” What does Paul mean by ‘at home in the body’ and ‘absent from the body’ if spirit and body are not distinct and if death is not a separation of the one from the other? Surely the ‘absent’ from the body means that at death the spirit would separate or depart from the body.

Karl Sabiers writes, “The original decree of death consigns only ‘the dust’ (the body) to return to the earth, while the ‘spirit returns to God who gave it.’ Death is ‘the giving up of the ghost’, and the dead are not restored to life, unless their ‘souls come into them again’. We are now dwelling in ‘earthly houses of this tabernacle’ which we shall ‘put off’ at death. We now ‘abide in

the flesh', but at death we will 'depart' and will be 'absent from the body', and 'the body without the spirit will be dead'."

So, the nature of death is made clear in the Holy Scriptures. Death is the separation of the immaterial nature of man from the material nature. James 2:26 makes it final as it says, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

### **Intermediate State of the Dead**

We have learned death is the separation of the spirit or spiritual nature from the body. The next question to be answered is what becomes of the departed spirits? Are they roaming about in space like 'ghosts' or do they depart to some definite place?

First, it can be clearly and emphatically stated the spirits of the departed do not roam about in space. The Bible makes it clear there is a definite abode for them. Let us first consider the righteous dead. What does the Scripture reveal concerning them and their abode?

Paul told us that for a Christian to depart in death is to enter a condition 'far better' than what we have known in this world (Philippians 1:21-24). The assurance of entering a condition 'far better' immediately after death, should be a great source of comfort for the Christian.

The most outstanding fact revealed concerning the righteous after death is that they 'are present with the Lord'. Twice he uses the phrases 'we are confident' (which in the literal translation is we can say with absolute boldness) and 'to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord'. Think of it, the righteous dead are in the bodily presence of Jesus Christ Himself! What could be more wonderful than the blessing and glory of being present with Jesus Christ our Savior?

Other Scriptures point out the blessed rest and joy of the dead in Paradise. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their

labours and their works do follow them" (Revelation 14:13). Sweet rest in the presence of the Lord! Psalm 16:11 tells us, "in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore." Truly it is a wonderful place to which the righteous have gone.

It should be carefully noted no saint has yet entered the final heavens, nor has any sinner yet entered the final hell. Paradise is not the final heaven for eternity. At death, the spirits of the righteous go to a temporary paradise in the presence of Christ, not to the final heaven. This eternal heaven, which the saints will occupy after they receive their resurrection bodies is described in the last chapters of Revelation, and should not be confused with the present Paradise, which the righteous occupy until the resurrection. Rene' Pache says, "Believers gone on before are not yet enjoying either the activity or reign which will follow the resurrection. On the contrary, ever since their arrival in the other world, they are enjoying a rest from the struggles and sufferings here below." As wonderful as the intermediate state is for the righteous dead, still it is incomplete compared to the final state of full redemption after the resurrection of the body.

However, just as there is a present temporary abode for the righteous dead, there is also a temporary abode for the unjust dead.

The Bible clearly distinguishes between the present abode and the future abode of the departed spirits of the unjust dead. In Luke 16:19-31, Christ made it clear the place of torment in 'hades' (hell), is the present abode of the unrighteous. The final hell is clearly distinguished from the present abode of the wicked (hades) for an altogether different word is used. The word used by Jesus for the final hell is 'Gehenna', not 'hades'. Gehenna refers to the 'lake of fire' mentioned in Revelation 20:10-14, not to the temporary abode of the unsaved dead. Hades is the temporary abode of the departed spirits of the unsaved dead, while Gehenna is the final abode of the resurrected dead who are outside of Christ and salvation.

Our Lord Jesus himself relates to us the account of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. The rich man died and was buried (vs. 22) and in hell (hades), his spirit was alive and con-

scious. He could see, for he recognized Abraham and Lazarus afar off; he could also feel, thirst, talk and remember.

Being in torment, the rich man cried to Abraham and said, “have mercy on me and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame” (vs. 23-24). When the rich man found it was impossible for his request to be granted, he prayed that Abraham would send Lazarus to earth to warn his five brethren “lest they also should come into this place of torment.”

What a horrible picture! Hades is a literal place of conscious suffering for the spirits of the unsaved dead, a holding place until the resurrection of the damned and the Great White Throne judgement of the lost (Rev. 20:11-14).

R.A. Torrey wrote concerning the condition of the lost, “The future state of those who reject the redemption offered to them in Christ is plainly declared to be a state of conscious, unutterable, endless torment and anguish. This concept is an awful and appalling one. It is, however, the Scriptural conception and also a reasonable one when we come to see the appalling nature of sin and especially the appalling nature of the sin of trampling under foot God’s mercy toward sinners and rejecting God’s glorious Son, whom His love has provided as a Savior.”

Yes, the thought of the lost in conscious suffering after death is appalling! But sin is appalling and especially the horrible sin of refusing and rejecting God’s love as provided in His Son, Jesus Christ!

### **Resurrection of the Body**

The testimony of the Scripture tells us the resurrection of the righteous takes place when Christ returns at the second coming (I Cor. 15:23; I Thess. 4:13-16). These verses give us the fact of the resurrection as well as the time. However, the greatest question of interest is what will the resurrection bodies of the saints be like?

The resurrection body will not be exactly like the body put in the grave. Paul says, “Thou sowest not that body that shall be” (I Cor. 15:37). It will far excel the body that died. Yet, there

must be some identity of substance or it would not be ‘resurrection’ (the rising of that which died).

Identity is not necessarily absolute sameness of substance. We are not the same identical substance we were about seven years ago. New cells are continually being added to our bodies, while other cells are continually being removed as waste products. The old cells are gradually being replaced by new ones. Therefore, we change cell substance about every seven years! We have a new body, yet our identity remains the same. Likewise, there will be great changes in the resurrection body, yet our identity will remain. The features of the new resurrection body are detailed for us by Paul in I Corinthians 15. “How are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come?” (vs. 35). Paul answers this question by telling us what the resurrection body will be like.

“It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption” (vs. 42). The present body is corruptible and is subject to decay and dissolution. However, the resurrection body is incorruptible and will never decay or dissolve in death. Again Paul says in I Corinthians 15:53-54, “For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.”

From these Scripture references we see the resurrection body will be gloriously changed to become incorruptible and immortal. ‘Mortal’ means ‘perishable, or subject to death’ and so, ‘immortal’ means ‘imperishable, not subject to death’. A tremendous change is coming! Paul tells us in Philippians that when Christ comes He will “change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21). Karl Sabiers says concerning the resurrection body, “The resurrection body will be incorruptible, immortal, glorious, powerful, spiritual - it will be like Christ’s glorious body, a body capable of being handled. It will not be a body of ‘flesh and blood,’ but a body of ‘flesh and bone’, that shall endure eternally.” A glorious future awaits the saved, but what about the resurrection of the unsaved?

Just as the righteous will not remain in paradise to spend eternity in a disembodied state, but will receive resurrection bodies to spend eternity in the final heaven, even so the unjust will not remain in the present hell (hades), to spend eternity in a

disembodied state, but will receive resurrection bodies to spend eternity in the final hell (Gehenna).

Speaking of the resurrection of the wicked Revelation 20:13 says, “Death and hell (hades) delivered up the dead that were in them.” It is certain the resurrection here referred to is the resurrection of the wicked, because it says ‘hades’ delivered up the dead. We know that only the spirits of the wicked are confined in hades, not the righteous. The righteous are with Christ in the heavenlies. Moreover, Revelation 20:5 says that after the ‘first resurrection’ (resurrection of the righteous) “the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished.” Since the first resurrection is the resurrection of the righteous, then the rest of the dead must necessarily be the wicked. The resurrection of the wicked will occur one thousand years after the resurrection of the righteous, that is, one thousand years after the second coming of Christ.

Thiessen comments, “It is clear that the first resurrection will take place when Christ comes in the air. The second resurrection will take place a thousand years later” (Rev. 20:5, 11-13). At this resurrection, according to Revelation 20:13, the grave will deliver up the bodies and hades, the present hell, will deliver up the spirits of the wicked. Thus, the unrighteous will be united with their bodies.

When we turn to our Bibles to learn what the resurrected bodies of the wicked will be like, instead of reading that they will be incorruptible, immortal, glorious like the bodies of the righteous, we find the Scripture is strangely silent on this subject. No statements concerning the resurrection bodies of the wicked can be found in Scripture. However, we can be sure that the bodies of the wicked will not be like the glorious bodies of the resurrected believers.

The resurrected bodies of the unsaved will be suited for eternal punishment, not for eternal bliss. While the bodies of the redeemed are fitted for heaven, the bodies of the lost are fitted for the lake of fire. How wonderful to know that no one has to be lost and headed for the lake of fire. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31).

## Conclusion

Death is a reality. Unless the Lord comes first, we all must face death. Yet, how wonderful to know as believers in Christ that death holds no fear! To ‘be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord’. When Christ comes again our ‘vile body’ will be changed and made like His ‘glorious body’. No fear or hopelessness here! We remember Scripture tells us some day there will be ‘no more death’ (Rev. 21:4) for “the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death” (I Cor. 15:26). Those who trust Christ look forward to that time in certain assurance, knowing that Christ has conquered death for all who trust Him!